

NCA
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NEWS ANALYSIS NO. 1-0451
CHARLES MEDD

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ELECTION 76: FOREIGN POLICY AND THE CAMPAIGN

ANNCR:

THE CONDUCT AND DIRECTION OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY HAS BECOME AN ISSUE IN THE 1976 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN, AND CHARLES MEDD EXAMINES THE DEBATE.

VOICE:

IT'S AN AXIOM OF AMERICAN POLITICS THAT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS ARE DECIDED BY DOMESTIC ISSUES, THAT THE AVERAGE AMERICAN VOTER PREFERS TO LOOK INWARD THAN ABROAD. THERE'S A COROLLARY THAT SAYS THAT FOREIGN POLICY QUESTIONS HAVE LITTLE IMPACT ON THE VOTING EXCEPT WHEN TROUBLES OVERSEAS DIRECTLY THREATEN THE NATIONAL INTEREST. BUT THE FACT IS THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, AND THEIR ELECTORAL SYSTEM, HAVE NOT BEEN INSULATED FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD FOR A FULL GENERATION. IN EVERY NATIONAL ELECTION SINCE 1940 THE EXISTENCE OF WAR OR THE IMMINENT THREAT OF WAR HAVE INTRUDED INTO THE POLITICAL DEBATE, OFTEN DECISIVELY.

DURING THAT PERIOD, A BROAD CONSENSUS DEVELOPED AROUND THE NEED FOR A STRONG NATIONAL DEFENSE AS A DETERRENT TO AGGRESSION. WHATEVER DEBATE OCCURRED CENTERED LESS ON THE DIRECTION OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY THAN ITS DAY-TO-DAY CONDUCT. BUT DURING THE COUNTRY'S BITTER EXPERIENCE IN VIETNAM, THE NATIONAL CONSENSUS BEGAN TO UNRAVEL. AND IN ITS WAKE, A NEW DEBATE FOCUSED ON MEANS OF RELAXING WORLD TENSIONS, OR DETENTE.

THE 1976 CAMPAIGN HAS PRODUCED TWO OUTSPOKEN CRITICS OF DETENTE, REPUBLICAN RONALD REAGAN AND DEMOCRAT HENRY JACKSON. BOTH CANDIDATES PERCEIVE A STEADY EROSION OF AMERICAN MILITARY STRENGTH, ARGUING THAT RECENT AGREEMENTS HAVE FAVORED SOVIET EXPANSION AT AMERICAN EXPENSE. OTHER DEMOCRATS HAVE RAISED VARIOUS QUESTIONS ABOUT THE EXECUTION OF THIS EVOLVING FOREIGN POLICY AND ITS EFFECT ON U.S. MILITARY, DIPLOMATIC AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS. PRESIDENT FORD, WHILE ABANDONING THE MUCH-MALIGNED WORD DETENTE IN FAVOR OF THE PHRASE "PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH", HAS BEEN BUSY DEFENDING BOTH THE PURPOSE AND CONDUCT OF HIS ADMINISTRATION'S FOREIGN AND DEFENSE EFFORTS.

JUST WHAT IMPACT THE DEBATE HAS HAD ON THE VOTERS IS HARD TO TELL. THE PRESIDENT WON THE FIRST FIVE PRIMARY ELECTIONS, BUT NONE OF THEM BY OVERWHELMING MARGINS. WHERE HE LOST, IN NORTH CAROLINA, RONALD REAGAN CONCENTRATED HIS FIRE ON THE DETENTE ISSUE AND WHAT THE CHALLENGER CALLS THE SOVIET'S NEW MILITARY SUPREMACY. BUT NORTH CAROLINA IS A PECULIARLY CONSERVATIVE STATE WHERE SUCH ARGUMENTS WERE GUARANTEED A WARM RECEPTION.

SENATOR JACKSON'S STRIDENT CRITICISM OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY WILL NOT BE FULLY TESTED UNTIL NEXT MONTH'S ELECTIONS IN NEW YORK AND PENNSYLVANIA, TWO BIG EASTERN STATES WHERE ORGANIZED LABOR SHARES HIS DOUBTS ABOUT SOVIET INTENTIONS. BUT EVEN THOSE ELECTIONS ARE NOT LIKELY TO PRODUCE A NEW CONSENSUS AMONG DEMOCRATS TOWARD DETENTE, BUT SIMPLY MORE DEBATE. THE VOTERS OF BOTH PARTIES MAY WANT TO LOOK INWARD AGAIN, BUT THEY WON'T HAVE THE CHANCE. THAT MAY BE ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT BENEFITS OF A NATIONAL ELECTION.

JS/PY